The fires of 2000

Last year has been called the worst fire season since 1916.

Nearly seven million acres burned throughout the nation during 2000, more than two times the ten-year national average. There were so many fires burning at one time that there were not enough firefighters to go around.

Benefits of the Wilcox Fire include enhanced habitat and ecosystem function.

What made the fires of 2000 so severe? Lack of rain is an obvious answer, but it was a combination of factors including ongoing drought conditions, unusual weather events, many lightning strikes, and an accumulation of woody fuels resulting from nearly a century of fire exclusion in areas that historically burned on a regular basis.

A major compounding factor has been the growth of communities near the edges of open lands like National Parks and National Forests. This has put homes and other structures closer to the kinds of vegetation where large fires spread rapidly.

In response to the 2000 fire season, Congress passed the President's Fire Initiative, which includes a new National Fire Plan, and increased funding for fire preparedness, more fuels treatments, and more sophisticated fire management. As part of this plan, the National Park Service has a 2001 Implementation Strategy, with provisions for oversight and accountability for an expanded program, improved fire preparedness, wildland fire operations (especially hazardous fuels reduction in wildland urban interface areas), and assistance to rural fire districts.

Fire Management at the National Park Service focuses on restoring and maintaining natural processes associated with fire, while protecting human life and property. To help in achieving these goals, the National Park Service has a comprehensive fire management program including hazardous fuels reduction, prescribed fire, wildland fire managed for resource benefits, and wildland fire suppression. The new 2001 Implementation Strategy will enhance and guide the program into the future.

At Grand Teton National Park, the Fire Management Office has increased its staff for the 2001 fire season for improved fire prevention, and emergency fire readiness, and fuels reduction. Fire personnel cooperate extensively with the Bridger-Teton National Forest and Teton County Fire Department to manage fire and fuels across our administrative boundaries. Fire managers also work with wildlife biologists, vegetation ecologists, and historic preservation experts to use natural and prescribed fire to enhance habitat and benefit ecosystem functions.

During the 2001 fire season, Grand Teton National Park asks you to help out by being careful with fire, and invites you to explore the diverse fire-adapted vegetation of this unique landscape.

9,700 Acres of Fire

It was late morning on August 15, 2000 in Grand Teton National Park. There was already smoke in the air from forest fires in Idaho and Southwest Wyoming. But that didn't stop the clouds from gathering over the Tetons for another round of lightning and thunder. By the time the storm was over, eight new wildland fires had ignited in the park.

An aerial detection flight found that two of them were located near developed areas, which made them first priority. Firefighters were dispatched, and both fires were controlled by the next morning.

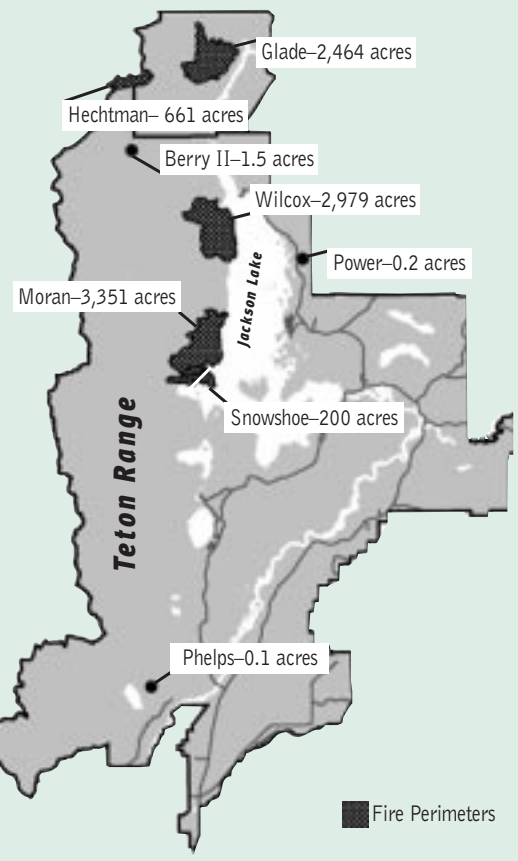
> The confinement strategy causes very little man-made disturbance.

There were six fires on the west side of Jackson Lake and to the north in the John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway. One of these, the Glade Fire, began to spread rapidly and threaten the Flagg Ranch area. Air tankers and heavy helicopters were ordered, Flagg Ranch was evacuated, and the highway between Lizard Creek Campground and Grant Village in Yellowstone was closed. By August 19th, the fire was mostly contained.

The Moran and Snowshoe fires near Moran Bay on Jackson Lake quickly merged together on August 15th. Firefighters were sent to protect the Moran Bay Patrol Cabin, but were not able to prevent the fire from consuming it.

With so many large fires burning at the same time, local fire managers were stretched thin. And there was still a significant threat of new ignitions. Therefore, a Type II Incident Management Team was ordered from Nevada to take over the Teton Complex Fires. The team prioritized fires that threatened developed areas, and used a confinement strategy to contain the spread of backcountry fires using natural boundaries and bucket drops from helicopters.

The confinement strategy causes very little man-made disturbance, because few firelines are constructed. The result is a very natural looking burn, closely resembling the landscape patterns that fires have caused for thousands of years. The Teton Complex fires have provided a diverse and patchy mosaic of both lightly burned and heavily scorched forest. The regrowth will be prime habitat for many kinds of wildlife, and the reduced fuels will help protect places like Flagg Ranch from fire in the future.



Mechanical Thinning

Firefighters call the places where developments and wild vegetation come together the Wildland Urban Interface. They worry about them because when people build up against the edge of the forest, they are asking for trouble when a wildland fire occurs. That is because there is no fuel break to prevent the flames from reaching the buildings. Sometimes there isn't even room to drive a fire engine between the trees and a structure. These situations exist all across the country, and after last summer's fires, many people are calling for something to be done.

In Grand Teton National Park, fire crews have been taking steps to remove these hazard fuels around buildings for years. They do this by thinning trees and removing dead wood and brush from the forest floor. They pile the slash and let it dry out for at least a year, and then burn the piles during wet weather in spring or late fall. You may not notice at first that this work has been done, but you might see piles of brush and logs that are waiting to be burned, such as at Colter Bay Village. This year crews will be thinning at the Signal Mountain Summit Road, and near employee housing areas.